

Emmanuel

December 24, 2025

Everyone my age or older knows Tank Man. History doesn't record his name—but we know the image. It was included in Life magazine's "100 Photos That Changed The World" and Time magazine named him as one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century.

On June 4, 1989, Chinese military forces cleared Tiananmen Square after six weeks of pro-democracy protests. On June 5, a column of tanks rolled forward, the machinery of empire grinding ahead as it always does. And then one person, a man carrying shopping bags—no armor, no megaphone, no safety plan, just a body—stepped into the street.

He didn't shout. He didn't throw a rock. He just...refused to move. And the tanks stopped.

For a moment—just a moment—the entire world held its breath. Because something was happening that shouldn't be possible. Power was confronted not from a distance, not from the sidelines, but from within the blast zone. From inside the danger. From the mess.

Tank Man understood something that we often try very hard to forget: That real change doesn't happen from a safe distance. That solidarity isn't symbolic. That love, if it's going to matter, has to get in the way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, as imitators of God in Jesus, we are not simply to offer words of comfort. "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

Tank Man understood it wasn't enough to stand on the sidelines and pledge support. Tank Man knew that change comes from our willingness not only to drive a spoke into the wheels of injustice but to be that spoke ourselves.

Christmas is God doing exactly that. Not sending instructions. Not offering thoughts and prayers from heaven. Not hovering above the mess of the world, untouched and unchanged. Christmas is God stepping into the street.

The incarnation is not God looking at human suffering and saying, "I see you." It's God saying, "I've got your back. Whatever happens to you, happens to me. We're in this together" It's God refusing to stay at a distance.

Which is why—if we're honest—Christmas is not nearly as tidy as we like to make it. We clean it up. We soften it. We score it with "Silent Night" and warm lighting and children in bathrobes who look nothing like first-century peasants under Roman occupation.

But the first Christmas was not quiet. It was risky. It was socially awkward. It was politically dangerous. It was a young woman whose body became a scandal. It was a man who stayed when leaving would have been easier. It was a baby born among the animals because no one would

make room. And it was announced—not to priests, not to emperors, not to the respectable—but to shepherds.

Now, to understand how strange that is, we have to remember how people imagined God. For most of human history, when people thought about God, they looked up. Often people still do.

God was up there. Heaven was up there. Holiness was up there.

You can see it in our buildings. Cathedrals that stretch toward the sky. Spires that try to touch heaven. Stained glass lifted high above our heads, as if to say: This is where God lives. Above you. Out there. Away.

So when the shepherds hear something in the sky, of course they look up, and of course they're terrified. Scripture always tells us how afraid people are when angels show up because they always say, "Do not be afraid."

But then the angels say something surprising. They don't say, "Stay here and keep looking up." They say, "Go." Go to Bethlehem. Go to a manger. Go to the place where animals feed. Go to where bodies are close and the air smells like hay and sweat and life and probably more.

In other words: stop looking up to find God and start looking around. Because God is no longer at a safe distance. God is lying on straw.

And the people sent to see this first—the ones entrusted with the news—are shepherds. Not landowners. Not religious professionals. Not people in power with the best plans.

Hired hands. Unsuccessful by every respectable metric. Shepherds didn't own property. They lived outside the city gates. They carried death on their hands—blood under their nails.

But the Holy One does not wait for clean hands. Does not demand polished faith. Does not require respectability.

Jesus' lungs, just learning to fill themselves with air, do not gasp at their presence. Jesus' eyes, just figuring out how to focus, do not turn away. He arrived for them just as much as he arrived for the Magi and for Herod and for you and me.

Which tells us something crucial about who God is and how God works. God is terrible at public relations—on purpose. God has no merch. No branding strategy. No influencer rollout.

Because big, flashy revelation doesn't ask anything of us. But hidden, humble revelation requires transformation. You have to bend down to see a baby in a manger. You have to move toward the ignored places of your life. You have to risk proximity to find Emmanuel.

That's where God keeps showing up. Not just back then—but now. In the places we'd rather step around. In the clerk at CVS who we mechanically interact with and then quietly forget as they

fumble with selling us gift cards. In the parts of ourselves we assume disqualify us from holiness. In the messages that tell us to get our lives together before we dare come close to God.

But Christmas says otherwise. Christmas says God comes close first. In the stillness of Bethlehem, the Creator of the universe rests in the arms of creation. The One who spoke the world into being learns to cry. The eternal Word becomes wordless.

Mighty God, indeed. Not mighty by overpowering. Mighty by consenting to vulnerability. Mighty by choosing to go through human hardship instead of around it.

How does love restore what it loves? By being with what it loves.

How does love confront death? By entering it.

This is what Christmas is. Not an escape from the mess of the world, but God moving decisively into it.

Like a man stepping in front of a tank. Like a baby born where no one expected anything holy to happen. Like a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome.

So tonight—don't just look up. Look around. Look for God in the places we've been trained to ignore. In the people the world dismisses. In the parts of your own life you've learned to keep at a distance.

Because that's where God keeps choosing to be. Not far away. Not untouched. But Emmanuel. With us. Right here. Right now.

Amen.

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